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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001471

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA
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P FOR DRUSSELL AND RRANGASWAMY
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DOD/OSD FOR U/S EDELMAN,A/S MBLONG

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TAGS: PREL PGOV PTER PINR UNSC MARR LE SY IS
SUBJECT: LEBANON: WITH DAS HALE, BERRI STRESSES LEBANON
NEEDS GOOD RELATIONS WITH SYRIA

REF: BEIRUT 1439

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri told visiting NEA Das David Hale on October 7 that while he worried about the presence of fundamentalists and Al-Qaeda in north Lebanon, he dismissed the concerns of some Lebanese politicians regarding Syria's increased troop presence at the northern Lebanese-Syrian border. The problems the U.S. has with Syria, he advised, could be addressed if Syrian-Israeli talks are successful. However, Berri accused Israel of continuing to commit humanitarian crimes by not turning over strike data of cluster bombs dropped in south Lebanon during the July 2006 war. The Middle East Peace Process, in Berri's view, was in a "dangerous" period with the possible expiration of the Palestinian Authority president's term, changes in Israeli leadership, and the U.S. political transition.

¶2. (C) Berri believed that the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) was the only unified institution in Lebanon. He said he was pleased to hear that current challenges to the U.S. provision of helicopters to the LAF are only technical in nature, and not political. On domestic issues, Berri admitted he did not personally support the recently passed electoral law. Yet, he said, because each party believes it will win, it is unlikely the electoral period will descend into chaos. Independent candidates, Berri guessed, would not have much success in the elections. He said he was optimistic about the National Dialogue, although results would take time.
End summary.

GOOD RELATIONS WITH
SYRIA ARE NECESSARY

¶3. (C) Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri, accompanied by his advisor Ali Hamdan, seemed perplexed by some Lebanese politicians' concerns about recent increases to Syrian troop levels along the Lebanon-Syria northern border in an October 7 meeting with visiting NEA Deputy Assistant Secretary David Hale, accompanied by the Ambassador, Pol/Econ Chief, and Poloff. He reasoned the Syrians felt compelled to act to reduce the possibility of fundamentalists or Al-Qaeda

elements from crossing into Syria. Berri said he also worried that these groups were establishing themselves in Lebanon's northern city of Tripoli. As long as the Syrian troops remained in Syrian territory, he said, he saw no reason to be alarmed. He declared it was essential for Lebanon to have good relations with Syria, not Syrian domination.

¶4. (C) DAS Hale explained that the U.S. agreed that Lebanon and Syria should have a good relationship. However, the U.S. was skeptical of Syrian motivations, Hale said. U.S. public statements denouncing any kind of foreign intervention in Lebanon were intended to reiterate U.S. policy and prevent Syrian miscalculation about U.S. support for Lebanon, said Hale. Berri advised that the U.S. policy of limited engagement with Syria was not helpful. Of more use, he said, would be to continue talks with the Syrians and to support Syrian-Israeli talks. If the Syrian-Israeli track is successful, Berri predicted the U.S. could also make progress with the Syrians on issues such as the implementation of UNSC Resolution 1701, human rights, and Syria's relationship with Iran. According to Berri, Syria will not give up all of its interest for nothing in return. "In every reconciliation, you have to give and take at the same time," Berri said.

"WE STILL NEED THE MAPS!"

¶5. (C) Berri told DAS Hale he publicly informed a special workshop, convened on October 6 by parliament's Human Rights and Justice Committee to discuss demining issues, that Israel

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has yet to turn over complete strike data of cluster bombs dropped on south Lebanon during the 2006 war. Berri claimed Israeli logic that handing over the maps would help the "resistance" was "nonsense," and called it a "crime." DAS Hale reassured Berri that the U.S. had urged Israel to release the full data, and would continue to urge it to do so. Berri noted that the Qataris may also provide additional financial assistance to the demining efforts, and that Qatari Sheikha Khassa, also the UN representative for landmines, participated in the conference. The Ambassador informed Berri that the U.S. had secured badly needed funding for the Mine Action Group's (MAG) demining efforts and would announce the additional assistance o/a October 11.

PEACE PROCESS IS IN A
"DANGEROUS SITUATION"

¶6. (C) Speaker Berri expressed concerns about the status of the Middle East Peace Process. He called the upcoming two months a "dangerous situation" with the possibility that Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas' term would expire, the transition from an Ehud Olmert government to one headed by Tzipi Livni in Israel, and the November U.S. presidential election. DAS Hale said he did not share Berri's assessment; on the contrary, the U.S. believed the contacts between Israel and the Palestinians had been going well. Furthermore, Hale said an end to Abbas' term did not serve the interests of peace and stability, a legal argument could be made to extend Abbas' term, and in fact Hamas may prefer not to have elections in the near term. DAS Hale also rebutted Berri's concerns about Livni, saying she has been the Israelis' lead negotiator in the peace talks and the U.S. believes she is committed to the process.

LAF IS THE ONLY UNIFIED INSTITUTION

¶7. (C) Berri admitted that he was concerned about the depth of U.S. commitments to assist the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) following several skeptical press reports after the Joint Military Commission talks held October 6. DAS Hale reassured Berri that the U.S. was serious in its commitment to rebuild

the LAF through the provision of meaningful training and equipment. As one example, Hale informed Berri that current challenges to the U.S. provision of helicopters to the LAF are only technical in nature, and not political. Berri said he was pleased to hear this because the LAF is the only unified institution in Lebanon. He recalled his strong support for the LAF since the 1980s and opined that unity is necessary for Lebanon's political survival.

THE ELECTORAL LAW, ELECTIONS,
AND NATIONAL DIALOGUE ON TRACK

¶18. (C) Berri was unequivocal in his disapproval of the newly adopted electoral law (reftel). The law, passed by parliament on September 29, is "against the interests of Lebanon," Berri stated. However, he commented that what is good about the law is that it serves as a type of unifier. "If everyone thinks he will win, then there will not be chaos," Berri told DAS Hale. When asked to predict the outcome of the spring 2009 parliamentary elections, Berri said he could not, saying the elections will be very close. However, he did not believe that independent candidates would have much success in the upcoming elections.

¶19. (C) Berri was optimistic about the National Dialogue. He asserted that the talks would be difficult, but not impossible. To see results, he warned, would take time and probably would not be apparent before the elections. The national defense strategy, he acknowledged, would be the toughest issue, and is the remaining agenda item under the May 2008 Doha agreement, which called for the election of a president, the establishment of a national unity government, a new electoral law, and the start of the National Dialogue.

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¶10. (U) DAS Hale has cleared this message.
SISON